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PROVIDENCE

by

Magda Herzberger

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Providence

by

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Destiny was playing tricks on me on that particular beautiful Saturday morning. It was the driving force pushing me into a certain direction. I couldn't understand why I wanted to stray away on that day from the familiar streets of the city and explore its many side streets. I was sure that I would find my way back no matter what. I came to a very narrow street and, as I followed it, I realized that I was in the outskirts of the city. It was very deserted. I couldn't see any people on the streets and the houses looked so silent as though everybody was asleep. I looked at my watch, it was ten o'clock. I was wondering, "Is it possible that everybody gets up late?" But I still followed the direction I decided to take.

As I went on, a strange thing happened. The houses were disappearing and in their places tall maple trees emerged displaying their colorful vibrant fall colors. I couldn't understand how that was possible, considering that when I left home just a short time ago it was a beautiful day in summer, the sun was shining and the trees were clad in their luscious green foliage—it seemed that somehow in a miraculous way, which can't be explained, I stepped into another season.

Nevertheless, I kept on going and the houses came again into view, but I had the feeling that I was not in the right place. It looked as if I entered another city—but I still continued walking. The houses were deserted and there were no people on the streets. I could see tall maple and elm trees. A strong wind started blowing, stripping the colorful leaves painted by autumn's wizard from the old branches. As I went further, it seemed that I was getting into late fall. It was also getting cooler because the wind started

picking up. I looked at the skeletons of the bare branches lined up along my way. I realized that I was totally lost in that desolate fall landscape depicting the end of November. I didn't know where I was anymore and I was wondering where I was heading to.

My first thoughts were that maybe in the worst case I would knock on one of the house doors to ask somebody where I was and perhaps someone would give me directions how to get back to the city where I was residing.

Then, as I was going on, I looked back. Upon doing so, I could see a big column of people looking pale and haggard. It was a column of men and women. They looked like prisoners. Their backs were bent as if they were dragging something behind them, but I couldn't see anything behind them. They were dressed in rags. In front of them was a woman. It seemed to me from a distance that she had blond hair. She was dressed in a uniform that was familiar to me.

As they came closer, I heard the moaning of the people. I was thinking that those people must have suffered a great deal. The moaning became louder and louder. Although I was wondering who the people were, I figured that at least it was good to see some people. Maybe I could ask directions from them. The woman in front was smiling. She came to me and asked, "Where are you going?" I answered, "Frankly, I don't know where I am or where I am going." Then she said, "Well, why don't you come with us. Follow us." It seemed to me that she was the leader and I heard the people behind her telling me, "Don't follow us. Don't come with us. Stay away from her. Listen to us."

The woman said, "Well, don't pay attention to them, just come along with us." I asked, "Who are those people?" She said, "You are going to find out later. Right now, why don't you just join us?" I asked her, "Where are you going?" She answered, "If you join us you are going to find out." She took my hand and said, "Come, come along."

Then she got hold of both of my hands and she was pulling me. As we walked, I heard the moans and the warnings from behind, "Don't listen to her. Don't come with us. Get away, get away."

There was something strange in all that was happening to me and I thought perhaps I should indeed listen to those people. Maybe they were trying to say something; maybe they were trying to warn me. I tried to get away, but at that point the woman grabbed my arm and said, "You just come with us!" This time I felt that she was forcing me to go. Meanwhile, she was not only smiling but she was laughing and I couldn't get away from her grip.

We were going farther and farther. The houses disappeared. I heard the moans of the people, "You made a mistake, you made a mistake. You didn't get away at the time you could have gotten away. Now you are trapped." I realized that those people were right, I was trapped to a certain degree. She looked at me and she was smiling. "Don't listen to them."

Then I was horrified, because the column of people reminded me of the German concentration camps where I was a prisoner of the Nazis due to the fact I was of Jewish faith. I remembered now a scene from Bergen-Belsen, an annihilation camp where I almost died. I remembered the column of people I saw through the enclosed fence where I was together with other women prisoners. I could see a line of people dressed in rags, men unshaven and bent. They were bent because they were carrying corpses, the corpses of the innocent victims of persecution. They were dragging the corpses to be buried in the mass graves. The men in the group looked weak and emaciated. They were starving like myself. They were crying out, "Women, can you give us a rutabaga?" If we had a small piece of bread or a morsel of bread, we would throw it to them. Sometimes I felt

that I wanted to break my little six and a half ounce of stale bread in half and throw it to them. I did that many times. I could see the men fighting for that piece of bread.

Then, as I looked at this laughing blonde woman, to my greatest horror I recognized her. She was Irma Greze, the blonde Angel of Death—the terrible SS woman, the sadist who many times was beating the prisoners to death in the German concentration camps of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. She was the assistant of the infamous Nazi criminal, Dr. Joseph Mengele, chief SS physician and selector of the Jewish people whom he considered not useful—infants, children, old people, sick people, invalids, pregnant women, etc., for the gas chambers. He sent many of my family members who fell into this category to the gas chambers and others who were not useful. He selected me for slave labor for the gruesome task of dragging the corpses of innocent victims, digging the death pits and incinerating their bodies. The four crematories, although working full time, couldn't handle the daily quota of 27,000 bodies of the victims. Mengele also had his infamous laboratories in Auschwitz, selecting prisoners to be used as guinea pigs in horrible medical criminal experiments. Where Joseph Mengele and Irma Greze appeared death followed and raked wildly.

At that point I wanted to get away with all my might, but I couldn't because she was dragging me with such a force that I couldn't get away. I had to follow, and I knew that I had made a grave mistake. I knew that if I wouldn't have strayed away from the familiar street I wouldn't have gotten into such a predicament. Fate was the driving force, pushing me into that direction. As we went along, she was dragging me. I heard the laments of the people, "You made a mistake, you made a mistake. Now you can't get away."

We walked for a long time and we arrived at a place where there was nothing else but the barren ground. But I could see a huge pot with giant red blooming flowers in it.

They were so beautiful, so unusual, so exotic. It seemed to me that there was a platform on which the pot with flowers was standing. As we came in the front of the pot, suddenly all the beautiful flowers wilted. Then, suddenly, the platform on which the pot was standing sank. We were facing the entrance of an underground of some sort. I could see that we were at the edge of a deep hole in the ground. What was this underground entrance? I came to a frightening realization: we had entered a grave. But I had no choice, the SS woman was dragging me with such a force that I couldn't get away anymore. Suddenly the sunken platform above us was lifted up and it was shut tightly by invisible hands. We were lowered into that underground passage. The passage was filled with pale, emaciated looking people. They were lying on the ground and moaning, "Why did you come here, why didn't you stay out? You were tricked. You were tricked just like us." I wished that I would have followed the familiar streets of my city. I realized that fate was merciless to me.

Then, as we passed by all the people, there was somebody whom I recognized among them. It was my grandfather. My grandfather died many years ago. He was a very successful businessman, very much liked. I asked my grandfather, "How did you get here? You were such a successful businessman, couldn't you find a way not to get into such a predicament?" He said, "I couldn't make any business deals with death. I have no protection, I couldn't work out anything. You made a mistake to come here, you were tricked. But I hope there is a way that you can get out. I would like to see you at least getting out of here."

But the SS woman was dragging me. The only time Irma Greze stopped was when I recognized my grandfather. She only hesitated long enough to let me talk to him to find out the truth about where I was and what my fate would be. At this point I still didn't know exactly what would happen. She dragged me deeper and deeper into an

underground place and finally we came to a big furnace. It looked like one of the crematories in Auschwitz where each day 27,000 Jewish people were burned and cremated after being gassed. In spite of the fact that I also belonged to the Hebrew generation, I was saved. I survived three death camps: Auschwitz, Bremen, and Bergen-Belsen. I wondered why I was again subjected to such a frightening experience. I couldn't understand what was happening to me. Did destiny place me again into the hands of the terrible Nazi criminals whom I have seen committing horrible crimes during my captivity in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen?

She opened the door of the furnace and I could see a raging fire inside. I knew what she intended to do to me: to put me in the crematory too. But at that point I was possessed by a great force—a force greater than hers. I broke away from her arm, which was holding me tight. I started running and running. I was running full speed, but the underground place was vast and it looked as if it had no end. Many times she almost grabbed me—she was that close to me.

I heard a voice coming from nowhere, "Follow the light, follow the light, follow the light." I was running in a straight line with the SS Irma Greze running after me. As I was running I could see a small flicker of light which was becoming brighter and brighter. Finally I could see that it was leading to the exit of the underground. Irma Greze was behind me, close, almost catching me, almost catching me. Finally I reached the entrance of that big underground. I understood where the light came from in the dark grave. The platform that closed after us when we entered the passage was open now. I jumped out from it with the speed of lightning. Irma Greze wanted to grab me, but at that moment the platform was pushed down by an invisible force and she couldn't follow me anymore. She was closed in the underground with all the others.

Then suddenly the big pot appeared again with the beautiful flowers on the wooden platform. The exotic flowers were blooming again. I couldn't understand what happened or where I was.

Then I could see people around, but nobody paid attention to me and I was thinking, "Am I alive? Why don't they pay attention to me? Maybe they don't see me." Then I heard a voice, "You are alive, you are alive. They are going to see you. You were saved by God." I looked up and I could see again Elijah, my favorite prophet. He appeared so many times in my dreams and so many times I found consolation with his appearance and there he was. He said, "Don't be afraid, don't be afraid. You are alive. You were saved. Look, tell me what you see."

I replied, "I see these beautiful flowers and I don't know what they are. I never have seen anything like that in my life. What's their name?" He said, "These are the flowers of life which bloom again. They are blooming for you." Elijah disappeared and I started walking.

As I walked, I tried to get back to the place where I came from. Gradually I could recognize again the familiar streets of our city and the people who were so happy to see me. They said, "Where were you so long? What happened to you? We thought that something bad had happened to you. We thought that you were dead. We are so happy to see you coming back." I said, "Yes, I was saved. I came back from the Labyrinth of Death." I was walking happily on the familiar streets of my city. Again it was a beautiful summer morning and I could see the flowers blooming. I felt such a joy and happiness in my heart. I said a prayer to Almighty thanking him for keeping me alive.